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Pitirim A. Sorokin and the Reconstruction of Humanity

Pitirim A. Sorokin y la reconstrucción de la humanidad

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ABSTRACT

Even if Pitirim A. Sorokin is nowadays considered a master of sociology, he still remains relatively unknown to the younger generations of sociologists. This article attempts to reread the thought of this Russian-American scholar in the light of contemporary society, while also encouraging a greater awareness of him in the scientific circles of sociologists. The proposed rereading, specifically, regards the theme of the reconstruction of humanity and will be done through the analysis of three of his works that have been strongly criticised in American academic circles (*The Crisis of Our Age*, *Man and Society in Calamity*, and *The Reconstruction of Humanity*). They contain numerous topical aspects for contemporary society dealing with social change and crisis. In these works, Sorokin also proposes paths through which humanity can be reconstructed, along with the guiding role of sociology assumes in undertaking these paths. The whole of humanity, for the Russian-American sociologist, remains the only true creator of good living conditions for human beings.

KEYWORDS: Sorokin; crisis; calamity; reconstruction; humanity.

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RESUMEN

Aunque Pitirim A. Sorokin se considera hoy en día un maestro de la sociología, sigue siendo relativamente desconocido para las nuevas generaciones de sociólogos. El fin de este artículo es proponer una relectura del pensamiento de este estudioso ruso-estadounidense a la luz de la sociedad contemporánea y promover un mayor conocimiento sobre su persona en la comunidad científica sociológica. La relectura que se propone versa, específicamente, sobre el tema de la reconstrucción de la humanidad y se hará a través del análisis de tres de sus obras, las cuales han sido fuertemente criticadas por los círculos académicos estadounidenses (*The Crisis of Our Age, Man and Society in Calamity, The Reconstruction of Humanity*). Estas obras recogen muchos aspectos de actualidad para la sociedad contemporánea relativas a los cambios sociales y la crisis. En ellas Sorokin también propone caminos a través de los cuales reconstruir la humanidad y el papel guía de la sociología para emprender esos caminos. El conjunto de la humanidad, para el sociólogo ruso-estadounidense, sigue siendo el único y verdadero artífice de buenas condiciones de vida para el ser humano.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sorokin; crisis; calamidad; reconstrucción; humanidad.

1. The theoretical relevance of Pitirim A. Sorokin

Understanding how the theories of some so-called “classical” scholars are intertwined with their own biographies and human history – as is particularly true for Pitirim A. Sorokin (Zyuzev, 2019) – is not only fascinating but, at the same time, is challenging and helps to explain their choice of some specific themes and studies rather than others.

Re-reading a sociological “classic” such as Pitirim A. Sorokin – relatively unknown to the younger generations of sociologists – is an even more difficult task, given the vastness of his work and the attention it pays to various socio-cultural phenomena. The aim of this contribution is to highlight how much and in what way the forgotten theories of this scholar are current (Mangone, 2018a) and how they are deeply rooted in the search for an integration between the points of view and methodologies of different human and social disciplines.

These first lines will describe the scripts¹ as defined by Goffman (1959) – or the significant interactions of Sorokin introduced already into his *Sistema soziologii* (Sorokin, 1920) – that led me to the studies and works of this sociologist, while also highlighting the hostility towards him that was present in academic circles.

When I was a sociology student at the University of Salerno for the Sociology of Knowledge exam, I had to study the book, *I maestri del pensiero sociologico* (Coser, 1983) – the English edition being *Masters of Sociological Thought* (Coser, 1977). What struck me, even then, was the note of the translator of this edition (made under the supervision of Alberto Izzo) which stated: “The second American edition also includes a chapter on Pitirim Sorokin not included in the Italian translation” (Coser, 1983: 7). As a very naive first-year student, I did not ponder on the meaning of the note and continued with my studies. Only when I became a young researcher, did I begin to understand why that chapter had not been translated. I came across Sorokin several times, but every time I was about to

write something about this scholar, there was always someone who, for reasons of intellectual and scientific expediency, persuaded me not to, which made me more and more curious. I tell this story because every choice is situated in time and space. As for me, when I was “mentally freed” from the “opportunistic” intellectual and scientific constraints supposed to promote my career, I finally took the opportunity to satisfy that curiosity thorough bibliographic research on Sorokin’s works, starting with his Italian translations. Naturally, the note from the book I had studied many years ago came to mind and, to my great surprise, in retrieving the second American edition of Coser’s book (1977), I finally managed to “unravel” the mystery of the chapter on Sorokin. At best, the note was a poor justification. If I were to lean towards mischievousness, I could label it as outright censorship – and I will explain why. In the second American edition, Lewis Coser also adds the chapter on William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, in addition to that on Sorokin, but only the latter has not been translated. Suspicion cannot but arise: why is one translated and the other not?

I will try to sketch out an answer on the basis of two reasons. The first is perhaps linked to his relationship with Corrado Gini, as testified by their epistolary exchange – the letters are kept at the University of Saskatchewan (University Archives & Special Collections, P.A. Sorokin fonds). Gini, considered very close to Fascism, as were all the others tainted with the same brush, was relegated to the shadows. As if erasing Gini and all those he had exchanges with (Sorokin included) could also erase those dark moments. The second reason is, I suppose, linked to Sorokin’s anti-conformist nature. His non-mainstream attitude (what concerns American sociology, unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Talcott Parsons) made him at times in complete opposition to all the drifts of sociological studies not centred on serving humanity – and American sociology, at a time of its development, was certainly not focused so. Of the two reasons suggested, this one is perhaps the most accredited. It is precisely Sorokin’s way of being that caused him to be “disliked” by Italian scholars – an unscientific statement, but a particularly apt one.

Delving into Sorokin’s thought has allowed me to understand how, in today’s digital society, the role and functions of the human and social sciences – first and foremost of sociology – have been “lost” in the pursuit of the operationalisation of the social and the human being². The social sciences lost sight not only of their specific objects of study but also of their purpose of service to humanity (which Sorokin refers to several times in his work). Furthermore, and worse, they forgot that socio-cultural phenomena must be studied according to their dynamism (in space and time) since the constituent elements (personality, society, and culture) are constantly changing and cannot be studied separately (and this is true not only for sociology). The choice to delve into and write about this scholar meant (and still does) to highlight how many of his forgotten theories can be brought up to date – which for me also means, in part, overcoming and going beyond them. Needless to say, this does not apply only to Sorokin and his thought. In these times of crisis (exacerbated by the pandemic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus), some of his themes are as relevant as ever – such as

his studies on crises and disasters (Sorokin, 1941, 1948, 1942/2010) – and are deeply rooted in a continuous search for an integration of the points of view and methodologies of the different human and social disciplines (*integralism method*).

Reading Sorokin today, in order to recognise his topicality, means framing his thought within the historical reality experienced by the scholar. He himself, in his autobiography (Sorokin, 1963), points out that the evolution of his thought had several phases, corresponding to his personal and family events, so much so that he wrote in a fragment of a letter, “Eventfulness has possibly been the most significance feature of my life – adventure. In sixty-eight years, I have passed through several cultural atmosphere” (Sorokin, 1958a: 178). For reasons of space, I cannot expand on this author’s biography, referring the reader to his autobiography and intellectual bibliography. (Sorokin, 1963; Johnston, 1995). Here I intend to analyse Sorokin’s theories on social change and the crisis of society by examining his works in which these reflections are presented in an analytical manner. In particular, I will refer to the following works: *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941a), *Man and Society in Calamity* (1942/2010) e *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (1948). In these three books, in addition to the concept of crisis, the possible means and ways through which to transform the actions of individuals in order to guide them towards the reconstruction of a humanity shattered by a profound crisis are also recalled.

In these three works, however, Sorokin does not deviate from the previous overall theoretical framework and, specifically, from the systematic interpretation of social reality, its structures and dynamics that is methodically set out in the four volumes of *Social & Cultural Dynamics*³ (Sorokin, 1937a, 1937b, 1937c, 1941b). The development of the theory of the cyclical movements of systems that he had identified (ideational, sensate and idealistic) and that are produced by the transformations of the mental bases (cultural mentalities) of men and groups (experience linked to the thinking of individuals and the processes of symbolic mediation that enable the attribution of meaning) and that represent the elements from which his diagnosis of the crisis of society emerges.

The *ideational system* refers to theological science as the most important discipline of reference,

Mainly the supersensory, and superrational “subjects” and “realities.”, [...]. The sensory and empirical phenomena are studied only incidentally and even then not for their own sake but merely as “visible signs of the invisible world,” as symbols of the supersensory reality (Sorokin, 1957: 228)

and its criterion of validity refers to the Holy Scriptures, in which logical reasoning is entirely superfluous and is only recognised when sensory perception does not contradict the Scriptures. In the sensate system, on the other hand, the reality of the senses prevails and the relationship between man and society is instrumental: “Mainly the world of the sensory perception, like the phenomena studied in the natural sciences [...]” and has as its validity criterion the “Mainly the reference to the testimony of the organs of senses (often reinforced by their extensions – telescopes, microscopes, etc.), supplemented by the logical reasoning, especially

in the form of the mathematical reasoning.” (Sorokin, 1957: 229). Finally, the idealistic system incorporates elements of the ideational and sensate system (it is partly supersensory and partly sensory-empirical) and in it

the knowledge about the sensory phenomena is subordinated to that of the supersensory “realities.” The total system of knowledge here incorporates, [...] reasoning and empirical knowledge in the sense of the contemporary science. The ultimate reality is thought of as knowable. The exposition of the truth is dialectic and deductive (Sorokin, 1957: 228)

in this system, the criterion of validity is based on logical reasoning, without disdaining references to sensory experience; the three forms of truth (faith, reason, and sense) are integrated into it.

Each system corresponds to a science, and to the system of social sciences (idealistic system) belong socio-cultural phenomena characterised by meaningful interaction in which

The essence of the logico-meaningful method of cognition is, as has already been mentioned, in the finding of the central principle (the “reason”) which permeates all the components, gives sense and significance to each of them, and in this way makes cosmos of a chaos of unintegrated fragments. (Sorokin, 1957: 14)

Sorokin’s attention never deviates from the two foundations that characterise his entire theoretical framework: a) the indivisible socio-cultural trinity: society, culture and personality (Sorokin 1947/1962); the interactions of these three aspects and three further components (humans, meanings and vehicles) give rise to the complexity of socio-cultural phenomena and *meaningful human interaction* processes; b) the idea of sociology as a science engaged in the study of meaningful interactions between the elements of socio-cultural phenomena, and capable of pointing the way forward for the improvement of the living conditions of individuals.

2. Crisis diagnosis and remedies

Sorokin – in his book *The Crisis of Our Age* (1941a), written during the Second World War – argued that the crisis that was being experienced was nothing ordinary. It was not merely economic or political, but also involved areas such as art, philosophy and religion, as well as the entire way of living, thinking and acting in Western society. Today, one can think by analogy of the crisis that has been exacerbated by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus around the world. In this book, Sorokin, dedicates his reflection to a detailed description of the crisis of Western society in the different spheres of action of individuals, highlighting the diagnoses and different points of view that have developed on the subject. Among the latter, two were prevalent and opposed to each other so as to be defined – by Sorokin – the first optimistic and the second pessimistic.

The first diagnosis considers the crisis as an ordinary crisis of an economic nature and, therefore, surmountable with some interventions. To solve this crisis, the

adjustment of different conditions (economic and political) or the elimination of *wicked men* is proposed in order to hope for a return of prosperity. This diagnosis is optimistic in identifying both causes and remedies; the other diagnosis, on the other hand, is pessimistic (particularly in the United States) because the crisis is seen as the agony that precedes the future death of Western society and culture: “The present crisis is but the beginning of the end of their historical existence. No remedy can avert this destiny; no cure can prevent the death of Western culture” (Sorokin, 1941a: 16). Believing both diagnoses to be fallacious, Sorokin presents a third. This is not reduced to political and economic oppositions, nor even less to the destruction of culture and society, because “the *total sum* of social and cultural phenomena of Western society and culture has never been integrated into one unified system. What has not been integrated cannot, it is evident, disintegrate” (Sorokin, 1941a: 26). For Sorokin:

the present crisis is not ordinary but extraordinary. It is not merely an economic or political maladjustment, but involves simultaneously almost the whole of Western culture and society, in all their main sectors. It is a crisis in their art and science, philosophy and religion, law and morals, manners and mores; in the forms of social, political, and economic organization, including the nature of the family and marriage – in brief, it is a crisis involving almost the whole way of life, thoughts, and conduct of Western society. more precisely, it consists in a disintegration of a fundamental form of Western culture and society dominant for the last four centuries (Sorokin, 1941a: 16-17).

These are the theoretical foundations upon which the diagnosis of the extraordinary crisis that western societies were experiencing is also based, and which Sorokin analyses in the various areas of society. The analysis of the Russian-American scholar, however, is not limited to the diagnosis of the crisis, but also elaborates a theory to get out of the crisis. In the last chapter of this book (entitled *The disintegration of sensate culture; The roots of the crisis and the way out*), he identifies the way out of the crisis with the change of what he calls sensate culture – here the Sermon on the Mount is recalled for the first time, which in later works on altruistic creative love (Sorokin, 1954) will be taken up several times. He called for a change in the mentality and attitudes of individuals in the direction of the norms prescribed by the Sermon on the Mount, since such a change would entail a reshaping of economic and political structures. In essence, the change was to modify the forms of social relations, replacing *antagonistic behavior* or *compulsory* and *contractual* relations with purer relations so as to transform the value system and the conduct of individuals towards others, cultural values and the world in general. In this way, Sorokin can be considered a promoter of the overcoming of modern culture (sensate system) in the direction of a transformation of relations between individuals, as well as between them and institutions through the rediscovery of the positive values of man (Mangone, 2020; Mangone & Dolgov, 2020). It is no coincidence that the terms that are used by Sorokin to qualify the conduct of human beings already in the book *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (1928) – making a significant choice – are the terms *antagonistic behavior* or *compulsory*, and *solidaristic*, and not the terms *conflicting* and *cooperative*. An analogous typology (*Antagonistic*

and *Harmonious Interactions*) appears in an unpublished and undated typescript⁴ (Sorokin, n.d., chap. V: 8), without however the pages describing this typology. For Sorokin, the forms of interaction and conduct, therefore, represent a cornerstone of his studies. The choice of the term solidarity is not accidental. The guarantee of the protection of social weaknesses is entrusted precisely to solidarity, which presupposes reciprocity. The primary problem of a society in continuous transformation is the disappearance of the mechanical solidarity bonds of Durkheimian memory and, therefore, the action of the individual arises as a causal dependence between physical involvement and the pressure exerted by the environment on the individual. The term solidarity therefore presupposes the involvement of all the interacting parties in the social system, not allowing – in this way – the abandonment of social protections for the weakest, but soliciting the energies and autonomous initiatives of individuals to strengthen the protection and guarantees for all individuals. The solidarity form of human conduct, however, will later be replaced by *love relationship*. It should be noted that Sorokin in his studies made the words love and altruism interchangeable by referring to all the actions that produce and maintain the psychological and/or physical good of oneself and others through positive actions. The *love relationship* is considered by Sorokin as “the supreme and vital form of human relationship” (Sorokin, 1954: 76) that, before reaching this conceptual maturity with the works produced in the years of activity of the *Harvard Research Center in Creative Altruism* (1949-1959), had already made its appearance in previous writings.

Based on Sorokin’s analysis, therefore, the way out of the crisis is to change the cultural mentality,

A careful study of the situation accordingly shows that the present crisis represents only a disintegration of the sensate form of Western society and culture, to be followed by a new integration as notable in its own way as was the sensate form in the days of its glory and climax (Sorokin, 1941a: 24).

The transformation consisted of recognizing and correcting the errors that had been perpetrated in the sensate phase of society and culture in order to create a mental, moral and sociocultural revolution in Western societies. A revolution that could take place through five steps, which can be summarized as follows: a) rapid recognition of the extraordinary nature of the crisis; b) the recognition that the sensate system is not the only possible form and that above all it is not immune to defects; c) the shift from one system to another when one acquires the awareness that the creative force of the first is running out; d) a profound re-examination of values and the rejection of pseudo-values through the strengthening of real values; and, finally, e) a transformation of the forms of social relationship and of the forms of social organization, hand in hand with the change of the cultural mentality. This remedy, from Sorokin’s words, is not based on the desirable, but on a sociological induction that is repeated in the same way for all previous crises and which can be summarized in the formula: “Crisis-ordeal-catharsis-charisma-resurrection” (Sorokin, 1941a: 321). The previous societies were preserved from dissolution not so much through the manipulation of economic, political, genetic or other factors, but mainly through the transformation of values, a sort of spiritualization of mentality and socialization towards positive social relations.

3. Diversification and polarization of the effects of calamities

Within the theoretical framework that analyses the socio-cultural changes of society following or during a crisis, Sorokin's analysis of the changes that are a consequence of calamities also fits. *Man and Society in Calamity* (1942/2010) tackles the problem of the transformations of daily life following calamities. Starting from the idea that individuals live in an age in which calamities repeat themselves and are, more often than not, inevitable, Sorokin believes that they exert a great influence on many aspects of daily life: from thought forms to behaviour, from social life to the cultural processes of society. When Sorokin wrote this book, it was clear what was meant by calamities – whether they were directly caused by men (war and revolution) or natural (starvation and pestilence) – and how these *monsters* were going to transform the normal flow of the daily life of individuals.

The lexicon around the concept of calamity has changed, the term disasters is preferred (Mangone, 2018b), but in the merits of this work, the focus is on the effects of these phenomena on individuals and society.

In this work, Sorokin defines the “typical effects” that are repeated every time there is a calamity of the same type and states:

The life history of any society is an incessant fluctuation between periods of comparative well-being and those of calamity. [...] Sooner or later this catastrophic phase is succeeded by a new stretch of well-being, which is replaced, in turn, by a further period of calamity. And so this alternation goes on, throughout the entire duration of the society in question (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 13).

Beyond this first consideration, and even before discussing the effects on the thinking, attitudes, social organization and cultural life of individuals, he clarifies a general principle that he calls *law of diversification and polarization of the effects of calamity*.

By this principle is meant that *the effects of a given calamity are not identical—indeed, often are opposite—for different individuals and groups of the society concerned, since individuals and groups differ from one another biologically and psychosocially. Thus, a person who is immune to a given disease is naturally not affected by it in the same way as one who is not immune* (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 14).

and this also depends on the degree of exposure to the calamity of individuals and groups.

The effects do not fall only on aspects of an emotional nature (fear, anxiety, etc.) but also on the cognitive processes of social representation, individual and collective memory, as well as the structuring of thought.

The first of these effects consists in the *tendency of all the cognitive processes to be concentrated more and more upon the calamity and the phenomena that are directly and indirectly connected with it, together with increasing insensitivity (beginning with sensation and perception) toward extraneous elements.* (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 28).

Continuing along his path of analysis, he identifies the second of the changes that calamities produce and which consists

of a tendency toward disintegration of the unity of our “self” and of mental functioning. It manifests itself in an increasing incapacity to concentrate on objects unrelated to the calamity, in a growing dependence of our thinking upon fortuitous external influences; in a decreasing autonomy and self-regulation of our thoughts, independently of external stimuli; and, finally, in an access of various forms of mental disease. In brief, calamities promote the growth of mental disorderliness and disorganization (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 35).

Individuals and the social structure undergo profound changes and as already mentioned above, these also depend on the type and duration of the calamity. However, the common element is that these changes necessarily require the escape from a crisis situation and the search for new balances. Crises caused by calamities represent a normal moment in the flow of life precisely because, if not caused by men, they are unpredictable and inevitable, and therefore not to be considered *sui generis*. According to Sorokin, however, crises caused by calamities also allow for the recognition of characteristics of social systems that may not be otherwise recognized (propensity for resilience and solidarity, for example), as the calamitous event causes consequences on the vital, on the socio-psychological regulatory mechanisms, as well as on social change.

In this sense calamities one of the potent and radical agents of sociocultural change. Although when the emergency is over, many a society rapidly recovers (reestablishing its equilibrium, its unity, its institutions, its system of social relationships), nevertheless it is never the same as the one that existed before the calamity. [...] For good or ill, calamities are unquestionably the supreme disruptors and transformers of social organization and institutions (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 120–121).

In societies involved in a disaster, regardless of the type, there is always a *before* and an *after*, therefore it is a priority to tackle the problem of the emergence of an emergency by managing to outline the dynamics that characterize the populations when trying to give a new order (Mangone, 2018c) necessary to cope with the changed system of needs. In the last chapter, Sorokin turns his gaze to a future perspective (*A Glance into the Future*), also considering the means that could be useful for escaping from the crisis consequences of a calamity, as well as for overcoming the anarchy of values:

Since the trends are already in operation they cannot be prevented or averted. they can be shorted and alleviated, however, by the individual as well as societies. The best way for an individual to meet them is by integrating his values and rooting them - not so much in the values of the sensory world - but rather in the moral duty and the transcendental values of the Kingdom of God [...]. For societies, the shortest, the most efficient, and the only practical way of really alleviating and shortening the crisis is by reintegrating its religious, moral, scientific, philosophical and other values. This reintegration must be effected in such in noblest values of this sensory world, but primarily in the values of moral duty and kingdom of God (Sorokin, 1942/2010: 318).

In this way, it is possible to mend the fracture in the network of social relations that often makes the definition of the social structure itself chaotic during and

after a disaster. It is this process that becomes a powerful factor in socio-cultural change. One thinks, for example, of what happens in territories occupied by enemies or territories that become the landing place for a part of the population that makes an exodus to escape from the harmful effects of conflicts, famine and/or epidemics (i.e., refugee camps), or what happens in territories contaminated by chemical agents and the effects of these on the population. Calamities provoke major changes both in individuals as well as the social structure, while determining the need to start again, to reconnect the thread of the life of individuals and the community, thus trying to imagine a possible future, searching for a project that can get the whole community out of a situation of crisis (imbalance) and direct it towards new balances. It is worth recalling the persistent sense of uncertainty about the future of the populations hit by a disaster, the regret for lost affections and property, as well as the disorientation caused by the forced detachment from daily habits and the impossibility of recognising themselves in their own historical and cultural context.

In order to understand the real consequences of a calamitous event within a territory and a community, as well as on individuals beyond the victims and material damage, one must not stop at the moment when the emergency is over but must go beyond that and observe what happens in subsequent years. Observing these phenomena implies an intellectual action that goes beyond disciplinary points of view and methods of investigation (qualitative and quantitative). These studies and their methodologies must be oriented towards the integration of the subjective and objective dimensions. The binding elements are the interpretation and construction of reality through the relationships between individuals, and between individuals, society and culture. Since individuals are agents of interaction (in the world of everyday life and in institutions), all these aspects – which originate from communicative events – must be read within the framework of the process of construction of social representations with respect to facts, things or individuals, or simply to an object. When studying calamities, it is therefore necessary to consider an integrated interweaving of factors and the activation of different paradigmatic and disciplinary lenses. Sociological knowledge, and that of the other social sciences, must flow into a single integrated system of knowledge – traceable to Sorokin's (1958b) integralism – which must focus on all the aspects of transformation of the social system (personality, society and culture).

In the light of this, it can be deduced that Sorokin in *Man and Society in Calamity* presents the same remedies that he had previously indicated in *The Crisis of Our Age* to get out of a critical condition. For human societies, the quickest and most effective way to truly alleviate and shorten the crisis is to reintegrate their values, so that the nascent value system is rooted in the values of moral duty and can proceed to normalise everyday life by strengthening existing networks and structures, re-establishing pre-existing ones and/or creating new ones.

4. From crisis to the reconstruction of humanity

Sorokin's task of identifying possible remedies for the crisis continued with his book *The Reconstruction of Humanity* (1948) – the last one I examine – in which he attributed the disintegration of solidarity ties to the impact of the exaggerated individualism of the cultural sensate mentality, which could have led to the destruction of humanity if ways had not been taken to counter it. In the pages of the book, he tries to outline how individuals can emerge from the great uncertainty caused by the crisis following the Second World War. For Sorokin, the possible way out of the crisis can only be altruism, which thus becomes an essential and, at the same time, unique tool for peace and survival:

A peaceful, harmonious, and creative society can exist only when members at least a minimum of love, sympathy, and compassion ensuring mutual aid, co-operation, and fair treatment. Under these conditions its members are united in one collective “we” in which the joys and sorrows of one member are shared by others. In such a group a member is not as isolated “atom”, but a vital part of a creative community (Sorokin, 1948: 57–58).

He defines altruism by arguing that each individual, through their own direct experience, knows “what constitutes love or altruism” (Sorokin, 1948: 58), but then distinguishes between: a conduct *genuine altruism*, a conduct *nonaltruistic* which is not opposed to altruism but does not have its characteristics either, and a conduct *antialtruistic* or *egoistic* which collects all those actions which are clearly opposed to altruism (i.e., revenge, enmity, etc.). To these, Sorokin adds a further clarification on what is the “*wise and creative altruism from blind altruistic passion*” (Sorokin, 1948: 60); the first (wise) is composed of actions without harmful effects on others, and this regardless of the subjective or objective dimension, while the second (creative) is subjectively altruistic in its end but not in its objective nature which is non-altruistic. With regard to the latter, Sorokin himself presents the example of a mother who, caught up in her passion for her son, satisfies all his whims without managing to inhibit his demands (even the harmful ones).

Towards the final part of the book, he summarises the remedies for the resolution of the crisis in the sensate society. The Russian-American sociologist argues that, beyond the complexity of mental phenomena, the main reason for man's impotence in being creatively altruistic is the neglect of these phenomena by science during the last four centuries. According to our author, it is a priority for science to correct the misconception of man and the socio-cultural universe, and, for this reason, research plans must be promoted and pursued by the study of the *human energies*.

The conduct of individuals is not always positively oriented towards each other. However, such conduct can be transformed by a revolution of minds and hearts (obviously a revolution without violence). The book concludes with a recommendation for the future to ensure the renaissance and transformation of humanity to a creative order of happiness:

Since the existing sensate order is moribund, we have no choice, unless we are resigned to the extinction of our civilization, but to follow the road to renaissance and transfiguration. Assisted by the forces of the historical process and especially by the liberated energies of the superconscious, humanity may travel this road until it reaches the haven of the new order of creative peace and happiness. All that is necessary is the supreme mobilization of our available mental and moral forces, control of subconscious drives by the conscious and superconscious factors, and unflinching determination to meet courageously all the difficulties of the pilgrimage. It is for humanity itself to decide its destiny! (Sorokin, 1948: 241).

In Sorokin, therefore, confidence in the potential of the social sciences as guides for mankind is affirmed, to the point of even hypothesising the birth of a new applied science dealing specifically with the promotion of friendship, unconditional love and mutual aid:

The historical moment has struck for building a new applied science or a new art of amitology – the science and art cultivation of amity, unselfish love, and mutual help in interindividual and integroup relationships. A mature amitology is now the paramount need of humanity. Its development tangibly determines the creative future of *homo sapiens* (Sorokin, 1951: 277).

The first task of this new discipline would be a careful analysis of the basic aspects, properties and forms of the altruistic relationship (Sorokin, 1958c, 1959), which means that amitology actually starts from the study of social relationships and interactions. This is not only a return to his general theory of social and cultural dynamics, which holds together the three indivisible elements (personality, society, and culture), but also appears to be a final stage in the long intellectual journey undertaken by Sorokin, which aims at the search for the *summum bonum* for humanity: the search for that vital energy (creative altruistic love) to be promoted or rebuilt from the depths of humanity to help it emerge from the serious crisis that envelops it. As Rusu points out, therefore, there are two inspiring principles of amitology:

an anthropological end, aiming to discover the most efficient techniques for the altruistic transformation of human personality, and a societal ideal, aiming to reconstruct humanity as a universal community of altruistic love. At a micro-level, Sorokin strove for amitology to lead to the “creative altruisation” of persons and groups, that is, to people’s characterial transfiguration through the power of love (Rusu, 2018: 11)

and the application of these principles implies, however, an understanding of the mechanisms through which human beings take their decisions on the basis of the degree of knowledge they possess about a certain situation.

From the analysis of these three books, it emerges that Sorokin can be considered as the scholar who prefigured the overcoming of the sensate culture in the direction of a transformation of the relations between individuals, and between them and institutions, through the rediscovery of the positive values of human beings.

5. Towards the reconstruction of humanity: universal altruism

According to Sorokin, change must therefore start from the rediscovery of man's positive values, and science acts as a guide, also by overcoming strictly sensate models of knowledge. Sorokin's is not just a *sociology of crisis*, but a *critical sociology*, which does not stop at analysing the processes of degeneration of society but searches for its deep roots and presents possible ways of overcoming its negative aspects. The history of sociology tells of a development of this science that shows a neglect of studies concerning certain positive aspects of everyday life (love, gratitude, altruism, solidarity, cooperation, etc.). This is particularly true of the new generations of sociologists. This position is often justified by the fact that these are not considered a problematic (negative) aspect of society but a regular aspect of human and social affairs. From the outset, this science assumed a *negativistic mode* of operation, i.e., a *modus operandi* tending to bring out only negative or pathological phenomena without ever highlighting any positive and healthy phenomena (Sorokin, 1966). Moreover, it has also been characterised by an orientation towards the contrasts that individual societies present (normal/pathological, north/south, friend/enemy, centre/periphery, rich/poor, selfishness/altruism, etc.), often neglecting the significant relationships between all the elements that constitute and give life to socio-cultural phenomena (personality, society, and culture). In the *Declaration of Independence of the Social Science*, Pitirim A. Sorokin (1941c) expressed a clear position on the role of sociology and social sciences in general:

Sociology and the social sciences will abandon their insane ambition to be pseudo-mechanics, pseudo-physics, or pseudo-biology. They will reclaim their lost primogeniture to be a science studying socio-cultural phenomena directly, with their own system of referential principles fitted to the peculiar nature of socio-cultural reality (Sorokin, 1941c: 226)

Applying these principles and assumptions implies understanding the mechanisms through which human beings make their decisions. These dynamics highlight the problem of choice. The latter, in turn, must be declined with respect to the temporal dimension and the degree of knowledge of situations, as well as with respect to who and how decisions are made (individuals or their representation). The decision-maker bases his decisions on cultural mentalities and the degree of knowledge he possesses about a certain situation, but the way he decides has not yet been revealed. Here we return to the problem posed by Sorokin (1958b) concerning the construction of an integrated knowledge system that would hold the three forms of knowledge together: *empirical-sensory*, *reason*, and *intuition*. A system of knowledge capable of providing as many elements as possible for the understanding of superorganic (sociocultural) phenomena and, therefore, where possible, also predicting their transformations. The dynamics described so far make it possible to affirm that *the reconstruction of humanity is desirable*, which can no longer be configured only on the level of law, but also on that of a duty based on an ethics of responsibility (Mangone, 2021).

This applies to individuals as well as to politics and institutions. Although these positions may appear at first sight to be a *sociological humanism*, they are not in fact so. Rather, we are dealing with a *humanistic sociology*: a science that does not only analyse and study socio-cultural phenomena, but which, with its characteristics, helps to explain and understand that “more human” part of individuals who are producers of meaningful interactions (creative and responsible social actors). Sorokin was the forerunner of that “positive sociology” – in analogy with “positive psychology” (Nichols, 2005, 2021) – or “humanistic sociology” that many scholars hoped for between the end of the last century and the beginning of the third millennium (Berger, 1963; Lee, 1973, 1978; Goodwin, 2003).

From here, Sorokin invites the social sciences to analyse socio-cultural phenomena not only in their negative influences or effects, but also in their positive influences or effects. As can be seen, Sorokin laid the historical and intellectual foundations for the development and institutionalisation of a sociology that can contribute to the analysis and study of the positive attitudes of human beings with the aim of transforming their way of interacting by orienting them towards that bond Sorokin himself had called *love relationship* and which would characterise a free, harmonious, humanistic and creative society.

This perspective takes for granted the condition that the individual is a *homo socius* because he or she is a producer of meaningful interactions in a context of norms, values and meanings, and on the basis of this it can be said that the individual can be recognised in the concept of the *common good*. A good of individuals as members of a community and, as such, they can pursue it united on the basis of solidarity that manifests itself in universal altruism, capable of giving meaning to human action and its development. Sorokin, using a medical metaphor, stated that sick humanity can find an effective cure in the affirmation of *universal altruism* which is an *antidote* (Sorokin, 1958c).

Sorokin, for these reasons, towards the end of his book *The Ways and Power of Love*, indicates how universal altruism can be promoted.

Hatred is still one of the most powerful emotions of man and one of the most efficient “motors” of human behavior. In an overwhelming majority of human beings it cannot be quickly eliminated or even greatly weakened. It can, however, be rechanneled for serving different “works” and “operations”. Hitherto it has “powered” mainly interindividual and intergroup conflicts. Instead of this function, its power can be used for extension of love and for binding mankind into one solidary body. How? *By redirecting the power of hatred from its present channels of interindividual and intertribal conflicts into a new “pipe line” serving the sacred war of humanity against the most terrible, most implacable, eternal, and common enemies of every human being, every group, and of the whole of mankind: against death, physical and mental disease, gravest criminality, stupidity, ignorance, interhuman strife, ugliness, poverty, fruitless suffering, nature’s calamities, interhuman hatred itself, and a host of other forces inimical to every man’s creative growth and everybody’s vital, mental, and moral well-being* (Sorokin, 1954: 464-465)

As can be seen from the bibliographical reference accompanying the quotation, this statement, which on the surface seems to have been expressed today, is more than half a century old and remains relevant. For Sorokin, the fate of humanity

lies in the hands of humanity itself, which must respond to a dilemma: to continue predatory policies or to embrace policies of solidarity. Sorokin is credited with creating a dynamic sociology (the analysis of change) based on a total conception of man and society. The figure of Sorokin in America has remained *very Russian*, not only in training but also in the application of principles. He was not a “soldier of fortune” (Martindale, 1975), nor simply a “perpetual loner” as Coser had defined him (1977), but he was certainly a “prophetic” nonconformist (Johnston, 1995). So much so that he himself, at the end of an article in which he lists eight points that would characterise his worldview (*Weltanschauung*) regarding the “social creeds and political factions of the present time”, writes (ironic as he often happened to be):

I am looking to the coming “City of Manifold Integral Culture”. This explain why in this matters (to the utter confusion of all the tabloid mentalities who call me now super-fascist, now communist, now reactionary, now radical) I prefer to be a non-conformist “conservative like Hell” in some secondary matters, and “radical as Heaven” in important ones. So far as the revolution for the very foundation of culture - in the basic principle of the reality-value - is the greatest revolution possible, I am more radical than all the radicals of the “old regime of the culture.” Otherwise, to use the apt words of Henry Adams, I am a “conservative Christian anarchist” (Sorokin, 1940: 15).

These few lines perhaps clarify better than any other definition who Sorokin was, a “conservative Christian anarchist” that – from my point of view – must be interpreted as a free man who had always faced the consequences of his actions even when they led (several times) to the death sentence in Russia. Sorokin was always an innovative scientist, his conservatism regarding certain aspects of an evolving society, such as the transformation of the family and sex (Sorokin, 1956b) were linked not to his conception of science but to his aversion to a sensate and materialist society stemming from his Russian Orthodox education. On the other hand, the sociology he is faced with is a betrayed sociology, because it is bound up with what he calls *quantophreny and testomania* (Sorokin, 1955) and with the reductive conceptions he defines as the study of *mechanical models or robots* (Sorokin, 1956a), which leaves no room for a more open and profound look at the interpretation of social reality through which to give orientation, value and meaning to the research itself.

His positions, however, always started from an assumption: to place at the centre of humanity in its entirety made up of individual personalities interacting with each other and who were inserted in their own social and cultural context of reference, because only this could act to get out of the crisis that was considered to be irreversible.

Notes

- 1 Goffman defined *scripts* as those complex structures of knowledge one possesses about an ordered succession of actions. Scripts define various situations which have become known through experience. In everyday life, this appears to be the most effective methodology adopted by individuals to better manage situations and environmental interpretation through conceptual representations of individual objects, as well as events and social relations.
- 2 See the great success of quantitative methods, testing and the use of big data, Sorokin, from this point of view was an “uncomfortable” sociologist, because from the very beginning of the last century he denounced the asphyxiation of the humanities and social sciences (Sorokin, 1956a) as an end in itself.
- 3 It should be noted that these four volumes were later published by Sorokin himself in a single volume (Sorokin, 1957), which is the text referred to in this contribution.
- 4 The typescript, *The Nature of Sociology and its Relation to other Sciences*, was kindly granted in copy by the University Archives & Special Collections, P.A. Sorokin fonds of the University of Saskatchewan (Canada) which holds it together with the entire documentary archive that belonged to Sorokin.

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